

Fear Reactive Behavior

Contributed by Barbara Brill
Sunday, 03 February 2008
Last Updated Wednesday, 18 March 2009

An owner reported to us that her veterinarian had advised her to slap a 1 and a half year old ShihTsu when the dog snapped at her. As a consequence, the dog became very fearful of the owner. She asked for help from the Agbeh group because she was unable to catch her dog in the house to take it outdoors, and when outdoors, it was running away from her.

A dog may snap when it's frightened. In fact, numerous aggressive displays from dogs occur because of the dog's nervousness or anxiety.

Jean Donaldson gives us a good understanding about dogs' aggressive displays in her remarkable book, *Culture Clash*. I think you'd really like it. To help you step by step with some of the other issues, I'd strongly suggest that you also buy Pat Miller's book, *The Power of Positive Dog Training*. Each of these may be ordered on line from <http://www.dogwise.com>

Donaldson and Miller have very extensive backgrounds in understanding dog behavior and positive-reinforcement training. This type of training differs from the traditional, which I call command-based training. In traditional command training, the owner/handler is taught to give a verbal cue and to teach the dog to assume the desired behavior in response to that cue. Unfortunately, with command-based training, there's a strong compulsion element, and there's a serious overemphasis on correcting a dog for its mistakes, using physical punishment methods to do so.

In contrast to that, with positive reinforcement training, we have the distinct advantage of applying the principles of Learning Theory which have come to us from the field of psychology. Furthermore, we need not use any avoidance-training methods, no application of physical aversives.

Here are a few Learning Theory principles:

(1.) Organisms learn from the consequences of their behavior.

In other words, "any creature with a brain stem," as Donaldson writes, will try out different behaviors to see what works (to attain the objective), whether that be food, a safe and comfy place to sleep, or to increase its personal space by driving other creatures away from its territory.

We may use this concept in our own teaching to help the dog learn new desirable behaviors. In fact, many of us now use a clicker (a little plastic device that resembles a toy) to make a click sound to mark the precise behavior for which we will reward the dog.

Very shortly, the dog learns that the click sound predicts that a treat is coming immediately. And then, after about three trials, the dog catches on that its own behavior earns the click/treat. At that moment when the dog "gets it," that's as if a little light bulb goes off in the dog's head! Magic time. Now, as a result, the dog starts to voluntarily offer the behavior more and more. Why? The treat reward has reinforced the antecedent behavior (made it stronger). Thus, another Learning Theory principle:

(2.) Behaviors which are rewarded will be repeated.

Q: What do we do if we dislike certain of the dog's behaviors?

We may use strategies of safe home management to prevent lots of behaviors that we do not wish to reinforce.

Q. What if the dog finds the behavior self-reinforcing (e.g., barking at trucks that drive by, barking a people who pass by the yard fence)?

Again, we may prevent the dog's access to the stimuli which elicit such behaviors, and then:

(3.) Teach alternate behaviors incompatible with the behaviors we do not wish to reinforce.

I particularly like this one (#3), because now we have a chance to employ our creative minds to imagine what behaviors would work best, be most interesting for the dog, and which we may reward instantly to achieve our desired goal. This process is called DRI (Differential Reinforcement of Incompatible Behaviors.) It's a way to gradually extinguish the behaviors we do not wish to reinforce.

Here's a quick example. Suppose my dog jumps up on me when I come home and enter the house. I could deliberately choose to deny attention to the dog for jumping up, avert my eyes, keep my hands in my pockets out of the dog's reach, or turn my body away from the dog. But I would watch with my peripheral vision for just a few seconds, for the precise moment that the dog has all four feet on the floor. And I would click then, that instant, to mark and then treat/reward the dog for "four on the floor." That behavior, standing on all four paws, is incompatible with jumping up, you see.

Turning to your specific concerns about this ShihTsu who fears coming close to you. That's a learned response. You'll find it helpful to use a work-to-earn program. Select some highly delectable treats (high-value luscious food treats), put them in a plastic Baggie, and keep that handy in your slacks pocket. I put such Ziploc bags in the freezer, then take one out the night before, just before I got to bed, to put it in the refrigerator to thaw overnight.

For the lesson, I put the plastic bagful of treats in my right hand pocket and hold the clicker with my left hand. It doesn't matter how you do it so long as you don't point the clicker at the dog. Then just as soon as the dog offers the behavior I wish to reward, I click the clicker to mark that behavior, and then deliver the treat. The click sound always precedes the treat delivery. If you wish, you could drop the treat on the floor for Sam.

I start this right away with new foster dogs. With leash attached to its collar, I head toward the door to take the dog outside. I wait at the door for the dog to look up to make eye contact with me, then click/treat. Open the door. Within about three days, I wait for the dog to offer eye contact and the sit at heel position, before click/ open the door.

In most instances, I am able to ignore the behaviors I do not wish to reward. Of course, I don't permit a dog to bark and lunge at my face or anything like that. I prevent the behaviors which could cause injury to anyone or to another dog.

To help you get started, I suggest that you limit your dog Sam's access to so many resources, all that playtime with the kids and sleeping on the beds, etc., until Sam has a chance to earn some of these privileges. Think about it: if we give the dogs everything for free, won't they have a slight misunderstanding about their role in their families?

Sam may be a tad sensitive about hands approaching his face. If he growls, I would not follow the vet's advice to slap at his face in any way. I would comprehend that the growl was a warning sign of the dog's nervousness, agitation, and then I would immediately increase my distance from the dog and start to engage its attention again from a few feet away. I like to heed any warning growl, respect the dog for communicating its discomfort. A dog would perceive a slap as aggression from its human. Thus, the dog may feel the need to engage in self-protection mode, aggressing further to make its point -- by the only means of communication the dog has available to it. Then it chose avoidance behaviors, increasing its distance from the owner.

Please remember that young puppies come to us with a will and a desire to form an attachment bond. You want to build on that bond of attachment, too. I can see that there's much you like about Sam already. That's great!

Donaldson's book Culture Clash will help you to understand a great deal more about canine behavior and why dogs have such fear-reactive displays. Try to stick with this group and read all the posts. You can learn a lot here over time. We'll want to hear more about Sam as you have an opportunity to try some of the suggestions offered here and through the other resources.

© 1/01/2002 Barbara D. Brill, North Chili, NY All rights reserved. No further reproduction permitted without express written consent. Email address: rewardtraining@gmail.com

